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ABSTRACT

By giving assignments to children in a field that inquires into the nature of language use, teachers can help enhance their total language development and sensitivity to language. To be most effective, such projects should involve children working interactively in groups; should require considerable time to complete and involve the solving of several subproblems; should result in a product (tape, performance, or solution to a problem); should require children to carry out the major planning, organizing, choosing, and thinking; should involve the use of real material (live people, books, tools, or events); and should integrate the language arts in a natural way. Sociolinguistic topics that lend themselves to group project work for children include naming, address terms, speaker comprehension/recognition, quantity of language production, vocabulary, and verbal rituals. (TJ)

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The Child As Sociolinguist--or--Maybe the Kids Could Start Scrutinizing OUR Language Use?

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What's the most common name in the school?

Are slang terms understood in the same way by first graders and by 6th graders?

What term of address is used most frequently for one's female parent? (Do children who call their mother by the mother's first name have anything else in common?)

Can pets be bilingual?

All of these questions share an important feature: they (and many others like them) can serve as subject matter for the child-as-sociolinguist. They can provide an entree into a field which inquires into the nature of language use, and they can do this in a way which enhances both total language development and a sensitivity to language as an entity.

Language Development Projects

Since language development is considered an increase in one's ability to manipulate a linguistic system in a variety of contexts, an increase in one's knowing how rather than knowing about, many contemporary students of the subject (Cazden, 1972; Moffett and Wagner, 1976; Edelsky, 1978; Lindfors, nd) often infer or state directly that language development is better served by focusing on some non-language content, by talking, listening, reading, writing, and predominantly thinking, about something other than language. One approach, therefore, to language development in schools is to engage children in long-term activities or projects with the following attributes:

1. Children work jointly, in pairs or small groups, on one common project thus,
   a. increasing the numbers of work-related interactions they engage in
   b. requiring the use of language for at least the functions of directing, reporting, and logical reasoning (see Tough, 1976, for description of language functions) as the children collaborate on solving such problems as dividing the labor, reaching common understandings of the task, making long and short-term plans, etc.
2. Projects require considerable time to complete and entail the solving of many sub-problems, thus,
   a. requiring the use of language for the functions of directing, logical reasoning, and possibly predicting and projecting (Tough, 1976)
   b. increasing the likelihood that written language especially will be used purposefully and as it is in real life; i.e., that children will make lists of things to be brought in the next day because things will indeed need to be brought in and not because it is time to practice writing lists, that they will look up the spelling of a word because they want accuracy on the poster advertising their circus and not because today's Language Arts lesson is dictionary usage, that they will really skim (as opposed to <u>practicing</u> the skill of skimming) tables of contents of recipe books to find the dessert section in order to choose the recipe they will use as part of their project on cooking lunch for the whole class, etc.

3. From the children's perspective, the object of the project is to produce a product, whether it be a tangible one (a cage for snakes, a book of class stories, an oral history on tape), a performance-as-product (put on a play, be responsible for the public address system morning announcements for the week, prepare a treasure hunt for the whole class to participate in), or one where the product is the solution to a problem (convince the school administration to supply another bike rack, discover the accuracy of newspaper astrology columns)
4. The major planning, organizing, choosing --THINKING--for the project is carried out by the children. The children's understanding of the object of the project (attribute 3) and their responsibility to do the major thinking involved (attribute 4) lead to
   a. allowing children to make sense of the enterprise they are engaged in since the vision of the whole, the gestalt that is guiding them, comes from themselves. Too often, when it is the teacher who plans and thinks through a long term series of activities, including "motivating" and "culminating" experiences, intended to constitute a meaningful unit and the children act as lackeys carrying out the plans, it is the teacher alone who perceives and basks in the warmth of an interrelated, integrated project while the children remain in the cold--in the dark?--perceiving the sub-activities as discrete and often unrelated, though possibly enjoyable. That children will plan and have a sense of what the "whole" is about does not mean that every project begins with a known-to-children answer. Some projects that

serve language development are scientific investigations in which children ask and operationalize the question but neither they nor the teacher knows the answer. The sociolinguistic projects to be discussed shortly have this characteristic.

b. permitting much individualization as projects unfold in a multitude of ways through decisions made at many points

5. The projects entail the use of "real" material--concrete objects, live people, actual events, real books, real tools, etc., thus
   a. providing children with firsthand experiences that validate, in school, what they know already; i.e., that knowledge comes from a variety of sources and must be integrated and synthesized
   b. presenting authentic reasons to do a variety of Language Arts activities; i.e., to take notes, to role play before interviews or phone calls, to summarize perspectives of different informants, etc.
   c. demonstrating that school is a part of and is intimately related to the outside-of-school world
6. The projects naturally integrate the Language Arts, require authentic language use (both oral and written), and provide an environment for language development which is congruent with aspects of home language learning (Edelsky, 1978).

Projects with the above-mentioned attributes can obviously be the vehicles for learning about a variety of subjects and topics. Process objectives such as coming to know how to do science, how to do history, etc. can also be achieved through such projects. These process objectives are not necessarily clearly discernible from the topic of the project; i.e., a small

group of children involved in establishing and maintaining for classroom use a store of already-mixed paints in a variety of subtly different colors may learn as much about "science-ing" (predicting, methodically altering single variables, recording results) as they learn about color. Language development objectives are also not necessarily obvious in the "title" of the project, nor are they uniformly weighted within each project. (The nature of some projects will elicit more and different kinds of writing than others, for instance.) Work on many projects throughout the year, however, along with the guidance of a teacher who sees language development possibilities everywhere (ways to authentically work notetaking into a project on making a birdhouse, interviewing into a project on planning a history walk, dramatic improvisation into the construction of a box kite, letter writing into the making of a puppet stage, etc.) will help promote an overall increase in children's ability to use language for a variety of purposes with a variety of audiences.

Language As a Field of Inquiry

The fact that language development is a matter of increasing one's language know-how should not preclude the inclusion of questions about language itself from the pool of topics for projects with the above mentioned attributes. As opposed to activities focusing on grammar and vocabulary (whether game-like and "fun" or dittoed and dull) which are irrelevant in terms of one's effectiveness as a language user (Moffett and Wagner, 1977) and which may or may not increase one's understandings about language, group projects concerning sociolinguistic topics can inherently raise one's consciousness about language usage while the process of project work acts to enhance language skills.

Sociolinguistic topics which lend themselves to group project work in elementary schools consist of specific questions about language use to which neither the teacher nor the children knows the answers. The following are a few categorized suggestions of questions. Countless others are possible.

Naming

What is the most common name in the school?

What categories of nick-names are used in this school?

How many children are satisfied with their names?

Address Terms

What's the most common term of address for various relatives (mother, grandfather, etc.)?

How and under what conditions do teachers change their terms of address for other teachers?

What cross-generational changes are taking place in the practice of calling someone by his/her first name?

Speaker Comprehension/Speaker Recognition

Can all children in the class recognize the voice of each child in the class?

Do pets owned by class members understand language or do they respond to paralanguage?

Can children recognize other children's sex by listening to their voice?

Quantity of Language Production

What child in the class talks the most?

Under what conditions do given people talk more? less?

The Lexicon

Are there differences in slang in neighboring schools?

What slang expressions have become so out-moded that even older family members don't know them?

Do people in the school have different words for the same objects?

How are the same words treated in different dictionaries?

Verbal Rituals

What's the most common greeting used at this school?

How do greetings differ under different conditions?

Are chants, rhymed riddles, etc. known by all aged children in this school?

Do categories of verbal insults change with age?

What's the most common first utterance made on the telephone?

It should be emphasized that the pursuit of any of these questions could easily turn into another sterile exercise that would do little to enhance either children's own language use or their sensitivity to language itself.

If the sociolinguistic questions are assigned as individual work, there will be no need for the child to argue, justify, direct, orally predict, explain--i.e., put thought into words.

If all the sub-questions implicit in a question such as "what child talks the most?" or "how many children are satisfied with their names?" are answered by the teacher so that the teacher does all the major conceptualizing, thinks through the research methodology and question-narrowing, and hands the child a set of small tasks to follow, then the child will never have to think through such issues as: What will count as "talk"? Uh's? Will repeated words (I-I-I) count as one or as three? How about contractions? What counts as "most"? The

number of turns a child takes? The number of words said? What if the teacher calls on one child more than others? How will the evidence be gathered? If we survey children to ask about name satisfaction, what other information do we need on the survey? Will a nick-name count as a name?

If the teacher already knows the answer and assigns the child the task of finding the "right answer" to a sociolinguistic question, the activity will be much like many other school science "experiments". The "experiment" answers no question because the "experimenter" isn't asking any. Rather, he/she follows directions and often complains at the end that "it didn't turn out right", although further probing commonly reveals little understanding of the scientific principle involved——all of which reveals the fraud in doing "experiments" where the answer, though rarely the question, is known in advance.

The three pitfalls of individual and non-interactional work, a primarily teacher-planned and operationalized problem,and awareness of the "right answer" will further combine to favor written over oral language production during the experience.

Once again, in order to reap the benefits of increased proficiency in Language Arts, the child-as-sociolinguist needs to be engaged in an endeavor with the following language/thought development attributes: 1) the child is working jointly with a few others on a common question; 2) children are tussling with a question that is large enough to entail sub-questions; 3) children are well aware of the "big picture", the final product—in this case, the answer to a question for which neither they nor the teacher has the answer; 4) children are doing the major decision-making, problem-identifying, and sub-question asking; and 5) the child is gathering first-hand data (taping,

surveying, interviewing, observing, and attending to language in use). In order to add language consciousness to the pay-off from project work, socio-linguistic questions can provide the substance of some of those projects. With socio-linguistic issues as the topics of some language development projects, children will have a context for total language development as well as the added dividend of increased awareness about one of the world's most fascinating phenomena--language in its social context.

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